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ABSTRACT

A new county extension agent, having community development responsibilities, will be concerned with identifying projects, organizing for action, identifying key people for the projects, and identifying the resources needed to undertake new initiatives. Three methods of community action planning are discussed step by step. The social action process emphasizes the initiatives made by community citizens that can be legitimized and diffused among the public. The planning process stresses a clear, linear, logical form of rationale. Often planners stop with a written plan, leaving action to be taken by the community. The strategic planning process is the latest development in the community planning. Focusing on key issues and involving all interested citizens, strategic planning addresses questions of "What do we want this community to be like in ten years?" This process is an ongoing process that covers an immediate, intermediate, and longrange planning horizon. The planning process is useful to a new, inexperienced community group focusing on their internal plans. The strategic planning process is useful to guide an experienced group focusing on community economic development. The social action process is the one an agent should always use for a personal guide when involved in any new community development initiatives. (ALL)

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ANSWERING THE HOW QUESTION IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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ANSWERING THE HOW QUESTION IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Community involvement is becoming the norm rather than the exception for Extension faculty located in county offices. For a new county Extension agent who has community development responsibilities the following set of ideas will be useful in focusing their early efforts. All activities they get involved in will be addressing one or more of these four questions.

1. What can be done to improve the quality of life in our community?
2. How do we organize and function to get things done?
3. Who will do the work? Who will lead and who will follow?
4. Where are the resources needed to undertake new initiatives?

This article will discuss three ways to get things done in a community. They are (1) the Social Action Process, (2) the Planning Process and (3) the Strategic Planning Process.

The Social Action Process is one that has been used successfully by Extension professionals for years. A recent publication lists the following steps.[1]

1. Recognize social systems.
2. Consider prior social situations.
3. Identify the problem or opportunity.
4. Initiate the idea.
5. Legitimize the idea.
6. Diffuse the idea.
7. Establish the need in the minds of the people.
8. Get commitments to action.
9. Set goals.
10. Determine means.
11. Develop a plan of action.

12. Organize human and other resources.

13. Launch the program.

14. Take action.

15. Evaluate results based on original goals.

The first step is initiated by community citizens who have an idea about solving a problem or exploiting an opportunity. This idea is then developed as a public issue. But before the concerned citizens begin selling their idea they must research past events that may influence the success of their intended efforts. For example, if the idea is to use the high school gymnasium as a public recreation facility it would be wise to visit with past and present school board officials. Often, an idea has been tried with a negative outcome. The school may have been damaged by someone during non-school hours. The school board may have had to pay someone extra to monitor the facility during these extra hours and clean-up afterward. Knowing these facts and knowing the people who will react negatively to an idea is important. It is the responsibility of the initiating group to be able to provide well thought out counter measures to mitigate the potential negative outcomes of their plan.

The next important step in the Social Action Process is to legitimize the idea. This is done by coopting the power structure into either backing an idea or remaining neutral on the issue. Contact these important people personally and give each one a chance to hear, review, reflect on and react to the idea. When this is done out of the public eye then the prestige of that individual is not jeopardized. By passing this group will jeopardize the success of the idea.

Once the potential road blocks are cleared in the legitimizing step then the next step is to diffuse the idea. This can be done through word-of-mouth, an editorial in the newspaper, a news story, a radio interview or a town meeting. A group of people can be given the task of being the "diffusion set." They take the idea to the public and sell it as a useful way to improve the quality of life in the community. With a well developed campaign to sell the new idea, key decision makers will make a commitment to act on the idea.

The remaining steps 9-15 are self explanatory. However, many good ideas and plans falter along the way because people fail to think through and implement each of these next seven steps. Usually no formal evaluation step is taken. This is unfortunate because much can be learned from successful efforts and unsuccessful ones.

The Planning Process

The Planning Process has fewer steps than the Social Action Process (See Figure 1). The attractiveness of this process is its clean, linear, logical form. The ones who want to initiate a planned change start with an issue such as senior citizen housing needs. Next the situation is analyzed by addressing the following questions:

1. Where have we been in the past as a community on this issue?
2. Where are we now?
3. Where are we going as a community if the current trends continue?

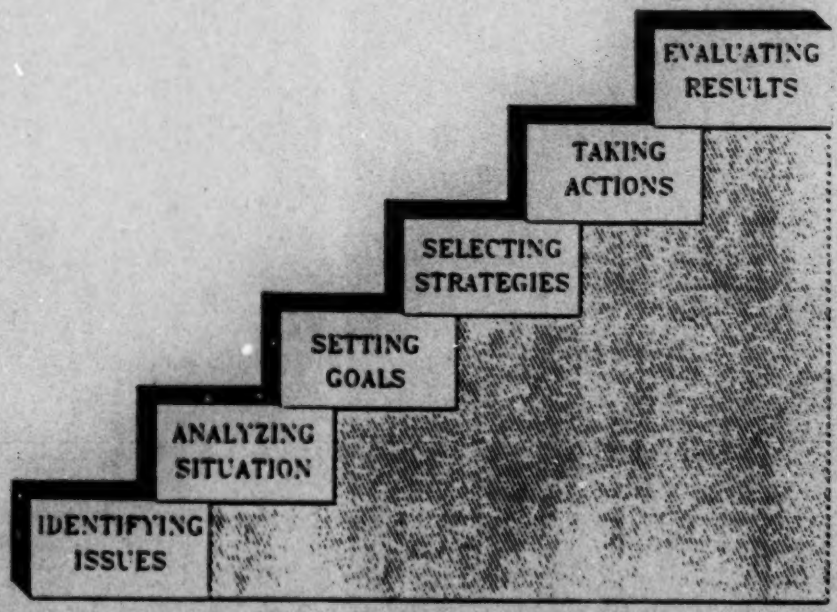
Often planners stop with a written document in which goals are set and strategies are developed. However, in community development the process is not finished until action is taken and the results of the actions are evaluated.[2] Usually, it is not the Extension workers task to take action. This is a community group's responsibility.

(The Planning Process)

Figure 1

Planners have been using versions like this for many years. In Figure 1 we see only six steps. As one can see the Planning Process assumes an organization exists to plan. It assumes away the social system, historic events, local culture and bias all of which can thwart a community development effort. It also assumes that community leaders exist and that they can bring the process to a successful conclusion. This is often not the case.

The Planning Process



STRATEGIC PLANNING

The latest in the techniques of getting things done in community development is the process known as Strategic Planning.[3]

The Strategic Planning Process differs from the Planning Process. Many communities have a comprehensive plan that includes a land use, a community facilities, and a community services element. Also attached to this are building codes, zoning ordinances, and other local control regulations. But these are in the hands of paid staff and hired consultants with only a few elected and appointed community citizens involved. The Strategic Planning Process is inclusive rather than exclusive. All interested citizens are welcome to participate. At each step of the process specific abilities are needed. These include descriptive, analytic, creative, integrative, and implemental abilities.

Strategic planning is not comprehensive planning. It focuses on key variables such as external trends that impact on the local community and internal factors that can be controlled by local leaders. These are the key, critical issues not an exhaustive list of all possible issues. However, groups use strategic planning to address the question of, "What do we want this community to be like in ten years?" Thus, the process is not used to address only one issue.

Strategic planning does not try to arrive at the best of all possible outcomes. It develops a better outcome than the current environment would bring about. This is a relative outcome rather than an absolute one. It is also a feasible list of results rather than a wish list of outcomes.

The strategic planning process is not finished when the plan is published. The process is ongoing and the outcomes are strategies leading to actions that are targeted to meet preset goals such as a better arterial road system to move traffic around the city or a new revolving loan fund to help cash-poor local firms stay competitive and expand.

Finally, strategic planning deals not only with the long run, but also the immediate and intermediate planning horizon. Thus, those involved should be working on reaching goals that address issues that need

to be and can be resolved in the next one to six months as well as one to six years. The process has the following steps:[4]

1. Start by identifying current goals and strategies being pursued by city and county government, other existing community groups, and individuals.
2. Conduct a survey of the community situation in the arenas of business, economics and community attitudes towards change.
3. Assess local strengths and weaknesses.
4. Identify outside influences affecting the community.
5. Identify key issues that are problems and opportunities and prioritize them in order of importance. Then create a statement that describes a new vision of the future.
6. Specify desired outcomes that can be defined as your goals. Compare these with ones identified in step one. Also, fit goals together with the vision statement.
7. Formulate strategies to reach the new goals after considering the alternative strategies.
8. Finalize and formalize the strategic plan.
9. Implement the plan, then monitor and evaluate progress toward the established goals.

Strategic planning works best when a committee is formed that can function independently from the people elected to local office. Also, it is sometimes wise to organize a permanent community development organization that does ongoing strategic planning. The permanent committee then would be involved in strategic management.

Conclusion

The question "How do we get things done?" is a crucial one. The three methods of, (1) the Social Action Process, (2) the Planning Process, and (3) the Strategic Planning Process all are similar. However,

a change agent will use all three at different times. The simple planning process is a useful one to offer a new, inexperienced community group who is focusing on their internal plans. The Strategic Planning Process is useful to guide an experienced, ongoing community group focusing on more inclusive efforts such as community economic development. Finally, the Social Action Process is the one the agent should always refer to for his or her personal guide when involved in any new community development initiatives.

ENDNOTES

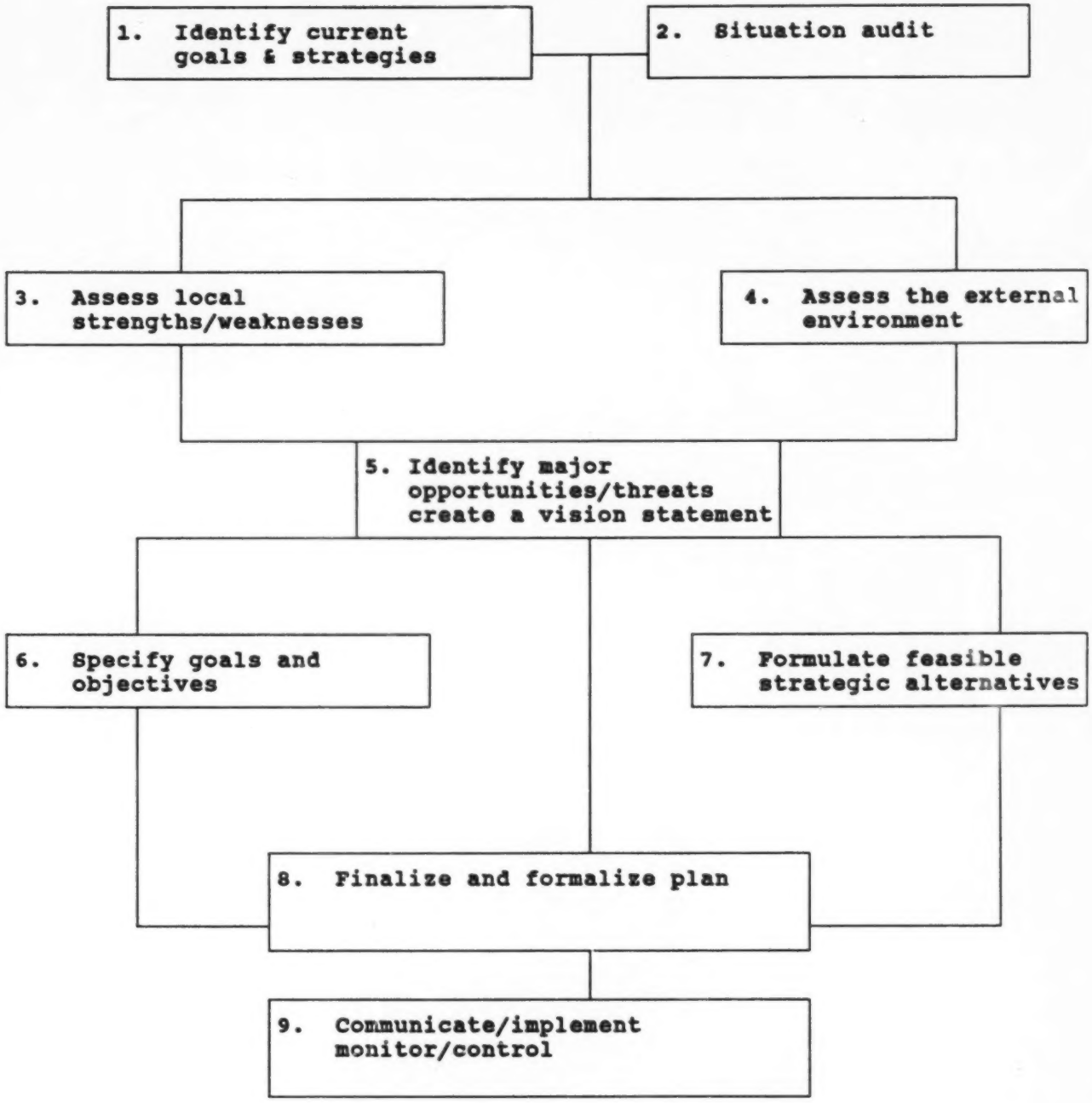
1. Robert L. Johnson, "The Social Action Process: Selling Ideas and Programs," (Manhattan, Kansas: MF 859, KSU Cooperative Extension Service, April 1987).

2. David L. Darling, "Setting Community Economic Goals," (Manhattan, Kansas: L-718 (Revised), KSU Cooperative Extension Service, February 1988).

3. Public Technology Incorporated, "Strategies for Cities and Counties: A Strategic Planning Guide," (Public Technology Incorporated, Washington, D.C., 1984).

4. Graham S. Toft, "Strategic Planning for Economic and Municipal Development," (Resources in Review, November 1984), pp 6-11.

STRATEGY FORMULATION PROCESS


1. Identify current goals & strategies
2. Situation audit
3. Assess local strengths/weaknesses
4. Assess the external environment
5. Identify major opportunities/threats create a vision statement
6. Specify goals and objectives
7. Formulate feasible strategic alternatives
8. Finalize and formalize plan
9. Communicate/implement monitor/control

Source: Adapted from Graham S. Toft